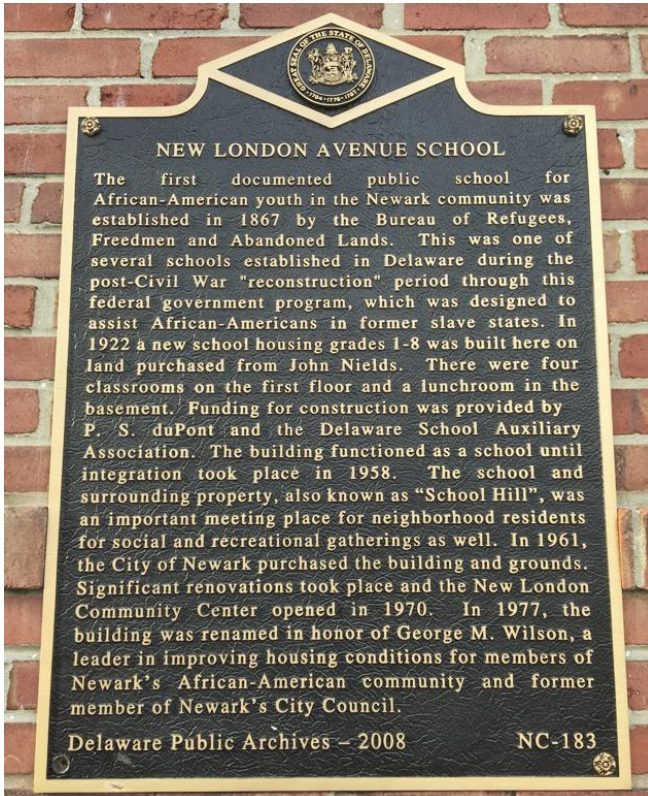




PARKS & RECREATION CITY OF NEWARK

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Overview of George Wilson Community Center History



August 15, 1922
Historic Photos courtesy of
Hagley Digital Archives, DE Public Archives

[Side and front exterior view of newly constructed Newark Colored School | Hagley Digital Archives](#)

[Side exterior view of newly constructed Newark Colored School | Hagley Digital Archives](#)



CELEBRATING 100 YEARS of the New London Ave School

Find out how to celebrate with us at
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The City of Newark, University of Delaware and the Friends of School Hill collaborated in 2017, 2019 and 2022 to celebrate the History of the New London Avenue School, now known as the George Wilson Center.

To view photos, documents and interviews from these events, please visit
[MSS 0642 - New London Road/Cleveland Avenue oral histories and research materials \(udel.edu\)](#)
[MSS 0784 - Friends of School Hill oral histories and images, May 2017 \(udel.edu\)](#)

To join the Friends of School Hill community, email Freeman Williams at freemanwilliams@comcast.net.

History of the George M. Wilson Community Center

The George Wilson Community Center, located at 303 New London Road, which is owned and operated by the City of Newark Parks and Recreation Department, is not an ordinary community center. The building, currently used for a variety of activities including recreation programs and rental functions, has great historical significance as a landmark in the Newark community.

The building was built because there was a need for a new school for African Americans. The first school for Newark's African American children was one organized by John Congo in 1860. This school was housed in the Congo home at the intersection of Corbit Street and New London Road. By about 1866 this school had grown sufficiently to move into a larger schoolhouse (South side of East Cleveland Ave).

In 1917 the Delaware General Assembly created a commission of five citizens to investigate and evaluate the condition of public education in Delaware. The report submitted by the professional investigators employed by the Commission "shocked thinking people into action."

One outcome of the wide publicity, which the Commission's report received, was the creation (1919) by the legislature of a State Board of Education, appointed by the governor and given wide authority over local schools except those in Wilmington and 13 of the largest incorporated towns. These latter, which included Newark, were designated "special districts" with boards of education of their own. Pierre S. duPont, then president of E.I. duPont de Nemours and Company and chairman of the Board of Directors of General Motors Corporation, was appointed (effective July 1, 1919) to the new State Board of Education, at which time he resigned from his business operations and began devoting much of his time to the cause of education. At about the same time, duPont also was elected president of the Service Citizens of Delaware.

One of the Service Citizens' first projects was to finance a thorough survey of the adequacy and safety of school buildings throughout the state. As a result of the "shocking" revelations, Mr. duPont created a trust fund. Using his own money, he established a 2 million dollar trust fund for remodeling existing school buildings and constructing new ones in Delaware. Between 1919 and 1928 he personally financed the construction of more than 80 schools for African Americans. The Newark school for black students on Cleveland Avenue (like others in Delaware, given the curious title "Newark Public School") was one of those replaced under the duPont gift.

The property where the George Wilson Center sits was purchased on October 14, 1921. "Following the offer of Mr. Pierre S. duPont, the School Auxiliary Association has purchased from H. Warner McNeal a lot of 5 acres on New London Avenue which will be the site for the new school building for colored children. The purchase price is understood to be \$1800. The purchase was made following the inspection of Dr. Odell of the Service Citizens and Mr. Taylor, engineer for the Auxiliary Association. The entire cost of this plant, ground and buildings will be borne by the School Auxiliary. No part of it comes from taxation." (11/23/21 - "New School Building for Colored District")

The building's design was similar to other schools being built all over Delaware. These "brick schoolhouses had flat roofs. Some had brick parapets with the stone inserts over each bay extended above the decorative stone cornice. The three room schoolhouses, such as the Newark Colored School had three banks of six windows and three bays that divided the interior into three, four, or five rooms" (Skelcher 95). "The 1922 Annual Report of the Delaware Department of Public Instruction reported that a 5-room school to accommodate 180 pupils at Newark was one of the "colored schools" under construction as of July 1, 1922. (Owen 4)

The four-classroom brick building with its basement lunchroom had cost approximately \$41,000 to build and construction was completed quickly (Owen). "David Boyles, president of the Colored Parent-Teacher Association of this district, has announced that Saturday, September 2nd (1922) has been set as the date for the official opening of the new colored school, on New London road. The work has been completed on the building for some time past and the rooms are already for the classes when school opens on September 5th (8/30/22 – "Opening Exercises at New Colored School"). "Dr Joseph H. Odell on Saturday in the absence of Dr. Walt Steel, made the presentation speech at the opening exercises held at the new colored school house on New London Road." (Date Unknown - "Presentation Exercises at Colored School").

The building functioned as a school until 1954 when integration took place in Newark. The school educated students through 8th grade. Newark's African American high school students attended O.O. Howard High School in Wilmington. The new building (GWC) provided a great improvement over the site on Cleveland Avenue.

The first teachers at the school were Alma R. Davis (7th – 8th grade), Mrs. Beatrice D. Smith (5th-6th), Olivia B. Young (3rd-4th), and Pauline V. Stricklen (1st-2nd). Teachers at the school when it closed in 1954 included Cornelius Morgan (Principal and 7th-8th), Mrs. Cora Saunders (5th-6th), Mrs. Olive Byland (3rd-4th), Dorothy West (1st-2nd) and Mrs. Esther Porter (Home Economics). (Department of Public Instruction Educational Directories)

The school became a gathering place for the African American community during non-school hours. "When school let out, the children of Newark made School Hill their second home. It became the biggest meeting place in town where everyone seemed to go. That's where they went to have fun, to play baseball, football or basketball, or just to hear what the older kids were talking about" (People Were Close)

"These buildings not only housed schools, but also served as community centers. In particular, Parent-Teacher Associations based their activities in the new schoolhouses. African Americans organized these local school associations under the auspices of the Delaware State Parent-Teacher Colored Association. With the support of the P.T.A.s, schools served as health care facilities. The health of children was a problem in the state. It particularly was a problem in the African American Community. Through the schools, many hoped to administer health care that was not available to many African Americans by offering health and nutrition instruction in the schoolhouses. Furthermore, healthier children would reduce absentee rates allowing them to attain an education" (Skelcher 103).

Integration took place in the Newark Special School District without incident. After the integration, the New London Avenue School was closed and transferred to the City of Newark (1961) for use as a recreational area. (Taggart).

"The proposal of the Junior Chamber of Commerce for a temporary civic center at the New London School, referred by Council to the Planning Commission on November 14, 1961, deserves serious consideration, together with other possible uses of the building and also the surrounding grounds.

This property – situated about 1 1/8 miles from City Hall – was purchased June 14, 1961 by the City from the Newark Special School District for the nominal price of \$5,000. Its acquisition for park or recreation space had been recommended by the Planning Commission."

“Use of the school building, located on the property, was discontinued in 1957. It is a one-story structure with partial basement. The exterior walls are brick; the interior is of wood and plaster. It contains one small (about half size) and four standard size classrooms, entered from a central hall, which runs the length of the building between entrances at each end of the structure. The basement houses the heater and utility service installations.”

“The property was made available by the school authorities for acquisition by the City only because estimated costs to put the building in shape for re-use as a school for handicapped children were considered by the state school officials to be out of proportion to the advantage it offered.”

“Under terms of its acquisition by the City, the property is available for civic uses without limitation. (It cannot be used for commercial purposes). (City Council Minutes – 12/61).”

Once acquired by the City, the building undertook some major renovations. The interior was gutted to allow for a variety of uses. The changes made during this time remain today including the building’s general layout with a multi-purpose “Main Floor” area, Rec Room 1 upstairs and 2 meeting rooms and bathrooms downstairs. Additional amenities were constructed in the park including a parking lot and outdoor pool. The City’s Parks and Recreation Department, which was an outgrowth of the Greater Newark Recreation Association, was created in 1970. One of the first City sponsored Recreation programs at this site was the New London Playground program during the summer of 1970. Since then the activities and programs offered here have continued to grow.

No discussion of the George Wilson Center’s history would be complete without mention of its namesake. The New London Avenue Community Center was renamed the George M. Wilson Community Center in 1977.

George M. “Inky” Wilson was one of the most respected individuals in Newark for his work as a politician, businessman and civil rights activist. He was the first and only black city councilman in Newark, for four years until 1962. He was a wrecking contractor, and he used the materials from demolished buildings to build 51 new houses, most in Newark’s black community.

During his tenure on Newark City Council, he gained a reputation as one who was unafraid to champion causes at his own political expense, and was an early and lifelong advocate of civil rights. In 1961, he took on the state police establishment with allegations of racial discrimination at Camp Barnes, a Sussex County camp for underprivileged children administered by the state police. Black youngsters soon were camping there on an equal basis. In the early 1960s, he led a protest against the University of Delaware, where less than two-dozen blacks were among more than 3,000 students enrolled there and no faculty members were black.

He began constructing houses at a time when Newark code officials ignored black housing, and led a battle in the 1960s to enforce the codes in black rental housing. He told the city council in 1963 to “make up your minds whether the Negro is a human being, a man, or something less, a beast,” and he named houses in the black section of town that he said were condemned as unfit for human habitation four years earlier but still were occupied. He said he was convinced that the owners were protected by “some political power in the city.” (Obituary)

The George Wilson Center remained a gathering place for the African American community during its early years as a City owned and operated community center. In 1980, the building offered Teen Center activities on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday evenings. Offerings included a game room (including pool table), library, television set and other activities. These activities were primarily attended by African Americans. “Most gather at the Wilson Center to take part in Teen Center activities, since it is the only area program that offers activities for black teenagers” (“No Place to be Somebody”).

Since these early days, the Wilson Center has continued to expand amenities and program offerings. Tennis courts, a small pavilion, horseshoe pits, a T-ball field and playground features have been added and updated in the park. The original pool has been replaced. Inside, a handicap accessible bathroom has been added upstairs and a new multi-purpose sports floor was installed as a major improvement for the many programs offered here.

Today, the George M. Wilson Center offers a wide variety of recreational programs including arts & crafts, dance, summer camps, pottery and yoga. The indoor facilities including a kitchen, pottery and dance studios, meeting rooms, and a large main hall, are available to groups and organizations on a rental basis. The main hall has a seating capacity of 150 and is used for a variety of rentals including birthday parties, anniversaries, weddings and meetings. There are three churches that meet here on a regular basis, and others including the First African People's Church who started here and have since expanded and moved on to permanent buildings.

The Wilson Center employs 1 full-time coordinator, 5 regular part-time building attendants and numerous leaders and instructors who work the many programs offered here. The building and park continues to be owned, operated and maintained by the City of Newark Parks and Recreation Department.

